



ANOTHER VIEW: Government IT is becoming content-centric

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By Mike Wash,

For the past 145 years, the Government Printing Office has been a print-centric agency focused on printing and disseminating printed publications. But the demands of the information age have forced GPO—as well as many other government agencies—to rethink and re-engineer its approach to creating and disseminating government documents.

The advent of the Internet enabled the wide distribution of electronic documents produced by new publishing processes, breaking the link between printing and dissemination. Agencies could make their information available directly. Electronic dissemination of information became practical and more economical than dissemination on paper. All of this change meant GPO systems and processes needed to change to accommodate new and emerging demands, both from agency customers and the public.

At one time, GPO's mission was accomplished through the production of conventional ink-on-paper printing followed by distribution of publications to Federal Depository Libraries and sales to individuals and dealers. Today, after more than a generation's experience with electronic printing systems, GPO is providing government information in a wide range of formats, including print and digital through GPO Access.

GPO is not in a unique position. Updating information technology systems is something most government agencies have been addressing. However, since GPO is in the information dissemination business, it has meant devoting a great deal of attention to re-engineering information systems while we continue to fulfill our mission.

The new age for GPO began in 1994 when, at the request of Congress, GPO placed the Federal Register, the Congressional Record and other core publications on the Internet for the first time. Up until then, printed documents were shipped daily to subscribing customers, agencies and the depository libraries.

This process continues today, but the demand for printed publications continues to decline. GPO now places more than 92 percent of the content it receives on the Internet. The remaining 8 percent comprises publications in forms that do not easily lend themselves to electronic access, such as maps.

The Internet and its impact on printing created the need for GPO to transform itself from a print-centric agency to an information- or content-centric agency. Today, information is expected to be available online, and the process of printing and distributing publications is no longer the primary mode. Digital

content received from Congress and federal agencies needs to be managed through a process that supports both the requirement to print publications and to make digital versions of the publications permanently available online.

In order to make digital content permanently available, GPO recognized the need to create an information management system to preserve digital content in perpetuity and make it permanently accessible. That's a long-term perspective few enterprises have to grapple with, but it is at the heart of GPO's considerations.

As a print-centric agency, GPO optimized its processes to create and deliver printed publications in a cost- and time-efficient manner. Information received by GPO for printing was processed (composed and typeset), printed, bound and shipped, often on very tight schedules. GPO's partners in the Depository Library Program then assumed the responsibility for preserving the printed publications and providing permanent public access to these publications.

Today, GPO is still a print-centric agency. To create a printed publication, content is processed to put it into a form that will support printing. That works well when the final form is a printed document but might not be the best process if another method, such as electronic distribution, is desired in the future.

To effectively preserve and manage digital content and ensure future availability of the content, GPO's strategy now is to focus on the native content and on how it needs to be maintained and preserved.

Shifting the emphasis to maintaining and managing native content is the second major transformation at GPO. We must rebuild and modernize the agency's information infrastructure and shift the agency's processes to a content-centric orientation.

World-class system

GPO has embarked on developing a world-class information management system that will enable it to continue to meet the expectations of Congress and the American public. This system is the GPO Future Digital Content System (FDsys), first outlined in the agency's Strategic Vision (details are available at GCN.com, Quickfind 565). FDsys will integrate existing and new functionalities to fulfill GPO's mission of keeping America informed.

Integrating and deploying complex digital systems like FDsys requires detailed planning and a methodical approach to enabling functionality. Such a process has been under way at GPO since mid-2005. FDsys will be developed in a sequence of structured releases.

An important component of this process was making sure the functionality delivered in each release, as determined by market needs, is delivered in a logical sequence to maximize efficiency.

As agency CIOs look ahead and consider how to manage the vast amounts of information and documents the government disseminates, there may be a lesson in GPO's experience: As agencies continue to develop their information technology infrastructure, we are also, in most cases, moving to a content-centric model.

That means grasping how best to maintain and manage the information of government in a way that preserves our ability to make this information usable and available to users and the public long into the

future.

GPO's success will depend on how effectively we develop, coordinate and deploy complex information and business systems while maintaining operations with legacy systems.

For GPO, the end result will be a business and information system that is highly efficient and that will benefit the entire federal government and the public, now and far into the future.

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